A NEW WORLD AT FIRST LIGHT
April 4, 2010
Easter Sunday

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Isaiah 25:6–9
John 20:1–18

“Woman, why are you weeping?
Whom are you looking for?”
John 20:15 (NRSV)

So we come in our bewilderment and wonderment,
deeply trusting, almost afraid to trust much,
passionately insisting, too timid to insist much,
fervently hoping, exhausted for hoping too much.
Look upon us in our deep need. . . .
You defeater of death, whose power could not hold you,
come in your Easter,
come in your sweeping victory,
come in your glorious new life. . . .
Hear our thankful, grateful, unashamed Hallelujah! Amen.

Walter Brueggemann
Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Startle us,
as you started fearful, grieving, despondent men and women
early in the morning on the first day of the week long ago,
with news so good they couldn’t completely comprehend it,
could only sing it and shout it and live it the rest of their lives.
So come to us this day, with life and hope and courage
and love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

After just five days in the capital city of Jerusalem, Jesus of Nazareth was arrested, tried, and put to death. His followers scattered and now are huddled, in fear, behind a locked door somewhere in the city. One woman comes to the place where he is buried. He is not there; he is not dead.

Jesus Christ is risen. It is the very heart of Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the world-changing implications. And so, from the beginning, it has been our most important celebration.

In the eighth century, the Christian church made a major decision: to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord by adopting an ancient German springtime festival, “Eostre.” Eostre celebrated the rebirth of spring, fertility, and reproduction. Its symbol was a rabbit, a mammal with impressive reproductive capabilities. Eostre became Easter, and its symbol, the rabbit with its legendary reproductive capacity, became, voila, the Easter Bunny.

I don’t have issues with the Easter Bunny, but it has always, even at an early age, been a bit of an intellectual stretch for me. Santa Claus was at least plausible. There could be a jolly old man and his jolly wife who live at the North Pole and deliver wonderful gifts to children on Christmas. But a big rabbit? Not that I minded the results: the Easter basket full of candy, jelly beans, and, standing majestically in the center surrounded by plastic grass, a chocolate rabbit, sometimes solid chocolate that you could nibble at for a week or more. But I don’t think I ever completely bought into the whole deal.

So I read with interest an item in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 28 announcing that the Easter Bunny is making surprising gains on Santa Claus in popularity. Out in the suburbs, Yorkfield Center anticipated 30,000 children to line up to see the Easter Bunny. There is a company that provides a Bunny School for would-be Easter Bunnies. The first rule is “Don’t talk.”

From the eighth century, when the celebration of the resurrection got mixed up with what was essentially a fertility rite, the Easter Bunny hopped along harmlessly and modestly until he encountered the American market economy. He quickly became an economic driver and became a lot more appealing. Plain brown fur evolved into an added blue velvet vest and stylish wire-frame glasses, and now he is a cultural icon in thousands of malls across America, and millions of children visit him.

Cultural anthropologist Pamela Frese of the College of Wooster observes in the *Tribune* article that “Americans have increasingly turned to malls as

community centers where people of all religious backgrounds can celebrate so-called civil-religious holidays together. . . . People are still seeking some meaning to life, and if they are not getting it in the churches, it's hopeful that they try to get it somewhere."

"People are still seeking meaning." We are "meaning-seeking beings." Alone in creation we wonder where we come from, why we are here, what will become of us, and why we must die. There is about us a longing—to know and to be known, an emptiness that nothing seems to fill, a question for which there are no simple answers. I am convinced that that is why churches are filled to capacity all over the world today, because today we get down to business: this whole matter of meaning—is there any, and if there is, what exactly is it?

To be sure the music is magnificent today, and the flowers are extraordinary. There will be trumpets and great hymns and some stunning hats. And, to be sure, ministers will try to be funny by wishing the Easter congregation a Happy Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving because the ministers won't see most of the people again until Christmas Eve. Not me. After doing this for more than four decades, I'm convinced you are here (many of you did the unthinkable: stood in line on an unpredictable Chicago April morning to get in)—you are here, I am convinced, because you seek meaning and you know that today the church will get down to business and talk about it.

It is how the Christian story begins. The first words Jesus says in the Gospel of John are "Whom are you looking for?" They are the very same words he says to a woman weeping in a garden on the first Easter morning. "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Her name is Mary Magdalene. She is one of the persons, most of them women, in the Fourth Gospel whose encounters with Jesus are both life-changing for them and that tell us who he is and what he's about. Mary Magdalene is a follower of Jesus, a disciple. But in history she is confused with other women in the New Testament, and for a variety of reasons—none of them very good—she is often described as a reformed prostitute. That is exactly how Andrew Lloyd Weber presented her in the 1970s smash Broadway musical *Jesus Christ Superstar.* Her song "I Don't Know How to Love Him" was at the top of the charts: "I don't know how to love him, what to do, how to move him. He's a man, just a man, and I've had so many men

before in very many ways. He's just one more." I'm not the only preacher who jumped all over that and built a sermon around it—and a pretty good one at that—even though built on a false premise. I trust that no permanent harm was done. Frances Taylor Gench, whose book *Encounters with Jesus* we have been following through Lent, said Andrew Lloyd Weber warped her thinking about Mary. Gench repents and so do I. There is simply no evidence that she was anything other than an extraordinarily courageous and devoted follower of Jesus. She had demons, the Bible says, seven of them, and Jesus cast them out, helped her through what today we might call a time of mental illness. And then she followed him.

We meet her in a garden in the city of Jerusalem, before dawn, on the first day of the week. She has come to grieve privately. Mary was among those who joined him in Galilee, following along as he walked from village to village and taught in the synagogues and on the hillsides; watching as he healed the sick, gave sight to the blind; watching as he welcomed the outcasts, the poorest of the poor, the nobodies, touched the untouchables, sat at tables and ate with them. She watched as he gathered little children and cradled infants in his arms. She was there as they walked the hundred miles from Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, walked behind as he rode into the city amidst the hosannas of the crowd who thought he had come to claim the throne of David. She was there as the events of that tumultuous week unfolded, as he drove money changers out of the temple, as he taught and conversed with religious authorities. She was surely there when he gathered them all in an upper room, broke bread, and poured wine: "This is my body; this is my blood." She was there later that night when they walked to the garden and Judas showed up with Roman police. She saw him betrayed by a man he loved and trusted, saw him arrested. She was surely there in the courtyard of the high priest, who questioned him—standing, waiting all night long. She was there in the crowd on Friday morning as he stood before Pontius Pilate for sentencing; was in the crowd, now a mob, screaming for his death. When Pilate finally agreed that Jesus must be executed, every one of his followers fled in fear and found a safe hiding place, behind a locked door, to wait for things to calm down before sneaking out of town to return to Galilee—all but Mary. Mary, with his mother and aunt, alone, followed as Jesus carried his cross through the streets while crowds hurled insults and spit on him; was there as they drove spikes through his hands and ankles, raised the cross, and waited for his death. She watched, and heard him say, "It is finished," and saw him die. Stayed until just before dark, when two men, Joseph and Nicodemus,

brought a ladder and lifted him down from the cross, and she followed as they carried his lifeless body and wrapped it in linen grave clothes and spices and placed it in Joseph's garden tomb. Only then she returned to the place Peter and John and all the others were hiding.

The next day was the sabbath, Holy Saturday. Unable to sleep that night, in the early hours of the first day of the week, Mary returns to the tomb. The sun is not up yet. It is that predawn, mysterious gray, when it is difficult to see clearly. The tomb she had seen being sealed before is open. She looks in. The body of Jesus is gone. It is a final insult: someone has stolen the body, and who knows what they are going to do with it. This gentle, loving, strong, honest man is denied even a peaceful resting place. She weeps tears of grief and bitterness and returns to tell the sleeping disciples that his body is gone.

Peter and John, maybe remembering what he had said about dying and rising again, come awake immediately, chills down their spines. They throw on their cloaks and run, a detail I love. Old men think they can run, forget that they can no longer run, but men being men—which also means boys—this running, of all things, turns into a foot race. John, younger by a decade, easily wins, sees the empty tomb, the grave clothes neatly folded. Peter, winded, arrives. Peter, who two days earlier, after boasting that he would never abandon Jesus, would die with him, had then three times denied even knowing him. Peter, ashamed of himself, humiliated one more time by the reminder that he is not even the man he once was, walks into the empty tomb, sees what John and Mary saw. And then he and young John return to the place where the others are hiding. No alleluias, no shouting "He is risen," no singing. They lock the door behind them, lie down, and finish the night's sleep.

Mary, in the meantime, has returned to the garden. It is still dark. But now someone is there. The gardener, she thinks. He asks, "Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" It all spills out—how he was arrested, tried, crucified, and now someone has taken away his body. "If you know where he is, please tell me, and I will bring him back here." He speaks her name, "Mary." She recognizes him—it is Jesus. The world shifts on its axis. She tries to embrace him. "Do not cling to me. Go tell the others." And now Mary runs, flings open the door: "I have seen the Lord." The world shifts. The first day of a new life begins. It is dawn now, and the sun is shining on a

world suddenly brand new, a world in which death has been defeated, overcome by life.

The Greek word translated “Do not hold onto me” means more: do not try to confine, control, manipulate, own me (Gail O’Day in Frances Taylor Gench’s, *Encounters with Jesus,* p.132) .

Jesus cannot be held and controlled, that’s the first Easter lesson. Jesus, and the movement he inspired, is about more than our political, social, economic, or even theological and religious agendas. Don’t try to confine me in your religious practices, your creeds, your exclusive theology that reassures you that you are absolutely correct and everybody else is wrong and going to hell.

The second lesson is that there is more here than our minds alone, our reason, our intellects, can deal with. Serene Jones, the President of Union Theological Seminary, says that we try to deal with the resurrection by turning our faith in Jesus into a “primarily intellectual endeavor by accepting certain doctrinal faith claims.” But, she points out, Mary’s experience in the garden was decidedly not abstract or doctrinal. Quite to the contrary, the scene between the two of them is visceral, human, emotional, and deeply, deeply personal. For Mary, faith in Jesus was based not on ideas or theological proposals but a presence she could experience through her senses, one she saw and heard and touched but could not cling to. We have trouble here: we are uncomfortable with the idea that “he walks with me in the garden”; we are never more at home than with our creeds and theology and doctrine (Serene Jones, *Feasting on the Word*).

But deep in our hearts we long to know and to be known. We long to hear—to hear him say our name. Jesus comes, Serene Jones—an intellectual’s intellectual—says, as a “presence that reaches beyond our mind and touches our lives in ways that are felt, touched, tasted, smelled, heard, and seen.” Jesus comes as we put our bodies into a pew; feel the heft of a hymnbook in our hands; lift our voices, such as they are, in a hymn that resonates deeply in our souls; as we taste the bread, the wine. Jesus, the risen Christ, comes in our lives in the world, in our work, our dearest loves, in our friendships, our passions. Don’t just think about it. “O taste and see,” the psalms say, that the Lord is good. He is risen indeed.

What we are trying to say—and words simply are not big enough—is that death did not hold him, that death was not the end, not the last word for him or for us. What we are trying to say through all of it, even the occasional seasonal silliness, is that God has built into life an unquenchable hope and an irresistible sense that we are created for fullness and joy and life and a love from which not even death—his, ours—can separate us.

There is plenty of weeping. There is plenty of death. William Willimon, former chaplain at Duke and now a Methodist bishop, observed recently that sometimes life seems like a series of funerals, a reality that becomes more real the older you become. Willimon remembers an experience we have all had: a church meeting that was essentially one long litany of tragedy and sadness—earthquakes, plagues, governmentally induced disasters, murder, starvation, mayhem. Sometimes it seems that in the midst of all that tragedy, it is inappropriate or trivial or Pollyannaish to experience joy and hope. So we don't. We don't allow ourselves, and we dismiss the happy and hopeful as naïve and unreal in a world such as ours.

And yet if God wants us to be permanently mournful, why in the world would God give us beauty, a perfectly spectacular few days last week as a hint of spring coming. Why, Wendell Berry wondered in a poem recently, watching and listening to wrens, swallows and a mocking bird, why "birdsong from a source unseen"? (*Leavings,* p.51). Why the love of friends and dear ones? Why the first smile of a baby, a little one's hand in your own, why extravagantly beautiful flowers and a warm sun, why J.S. Bach and George Frederic Handel and Mozart? "Sometimes," Willimon says, "when you look at the world from one angle, it's almost as if God wants us to be happy."

He told about mission trips Duke students took to Haiti and how they came home talking about the most disarming thing—not the indescribable poverty, the suffering, but the laughter of the children and their raucous singing. As darkness fell on Port-au-Prince on the night of the earthquake, it happened again. Even Anderson Cooper was incredulous at the sounds of children laughing and people, in the streets, singing hymns, singing through tears. That's what people do who know about the resurrection.

The world is full of death, including the death just a few days ago of a beautiful young woman, Faith Dremmer, a senior at the University of Chicago Lab School, on a bike trip with two friends, both of whom were also

struck and seriously injured. Rabbi Aaron Petuchowski told the congregation at Temple Shalom about Faith Dremmer's amazing story—about her journey from a Chinese orphanage to Hyde Park, her love of life, her embrace of Judaism. Her life, he said, was an "unfinished symphony." How true, how utterly true—a symphony unfinished, but a beautiful symphony nonetheless, whose beauty will never die.

When there are no words, we sing. Kaia Tammen, in her hospital bed in Deaconess Hospital, Evansville, Indiana, after eleven hours of surgery, asked her father, Bruce Tammen, conductor of the Chicago Chorale, to sing to her. He sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Comin' for to Carry Me Home," her childhood favorite. "I sensed that it gave her great comfort," he said.

The singing began in a garden long ago, before dawn, when Mary, weeping, devastated—as we are sometimes, frequently in fact, by the senseless cruelty of the world, the randomness of evil and death—heard Jesus say her name and knew in ways she did not fully understand, at a place deep in her soul, that he was the victor, not death; that the last word about him was not death but life and love; that the meaning she and everyone of us longs for was in him, a risen Lord who overcame death. New life began at first light on Easter morning.

So please know, on this Easter morning, that God has created you for life and joy. Jesus Christ is risen.

Please know that whatever is happening in your life today, whatever you are dealing with, worried about, struggling with, there is a power alive and at work in the world and in your life. It is on your side; it will hold you up. It is the power of life and love. Jesus Christ is risen.

Please know that whatever you are afraid of today, tomorrow, in the future—there is nothing ultimately to fear. Jesus Christ is risen.

And please know that though death is real, more real is a love from which nothing, not even death, will ever separate you, and so you can entrust your life and the life of your dear ones to him. Jesus Christ is risen.

A new world at first light on Easter morning—
and the singing—

Christ the Lord is risen today
Alleluia!

Come ye faithful,
raise the strain
of triumphant gladness.

Jesus Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Alleluia. Alleluia.

Amen.